

Eritrea: Youth and Militarization

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Current mass media images of Eritrea's youth center not on who they are or what they have accomplished but on what they are trying to escape and how. They appear in the press as draft evaders, illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and worse. In coverage of the homeland, they are the victims of road-blocks, round-ups and arbitrary house searches as the government tries to capture them for open-ended "national service." To be caught is to face indefinite involuntary military conscription. To resist is to face imprisonment or death. To escape is to take on enormous costs and unimaginable risks.

Law governing military conscription

Post independent Eritrea's experience is marked by increasing militarization of the society and the country. In November 1991, the Provisional Government of Eritrea enacted a National Service Proclamation (Proclamation 11/91). The said proclamation obliged Eritrean youth between the age of 18 and 40 to undertake compulsory military national service, which includes six months military training and one year military service. Later in May 1995, Proclamation No. 11/91 was revised and replaced by Proclamation 82/95 to include an age group above 40 up until 50. Thus far, nearly 700,000 Eritrean youth have been conscripted under the national service and many still continue. Some accounts offer even a higher figure.

According to the later proclamation, an individual is supposed to serve in the military for 18 months. However, many have been under this yoke for nearly ten years and some others for more than that. While some are temporarily demobilized from the army due to medical and related reasons, thousands remain regimented in battalions and newly established 'military colleges'² or 'military boarding schools', and still others work in government civilian sectors, yet under Ministry of Defense supervision. In a nutshell, the nation has become so effectively militarized due to the persistent and successive conscriptions as well as due to the establishment of or otherwise due to the replacement of academic and civilian sectors by military institutions.³

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² For example, May NefHi Institute of Technology, its head of administration is a high-ranking military commander, Colonel Ezra.

³ For instance, the conscription of high school students in the army; young students, most of them below 17 years old, are obliged to finish their final grade in Sawa military training camp. See also From the words of some high-school completing students due to be called up for national military service in the next few months... "...they pray for time to go slow, because every day that passes is a day closer until my brother and I must go [to join the national military service]." See also Peter Martel, *Conscripts prepare to boost Eritrea's defenses*, available at < <http://www.metimes.com/storyview.php?StoryID=20070301-025913-1370r>> (date accessed on 10 June 2007).

Conscientious objection to the military service is not recognized by law. Refusing to partake in the military is punishable by torture, prolonged imprisonment and stripping of citizenship rights. The fate of members of Jehovah Witness is a case in point.

Lawlessness is the rule of the game

Contrary to what has been claimed via Eritrean official media outlets, the military service has been a major cause for degrading levels of innovativeness, creativity and adventurous nature of the youth, and not "to raise healthy and productive citizens".

There are no clear laws and a regulation governing the whole military system - a law that precisely limits the powers and responsibilities of military commanders, and that protects the rights of ordinary servicemen. Hence, rape⁴, nepotism and opportunism are widespread. They are normally committed by military commanders without impunity. What one normally learns in the system is how to become "fearful and obedient" to immediate military commanders. Hence, the massive youth outflow is the immediate result, and a clear sign of an utter defiance against the ill-practiced military service in particular and the increasing militarization of the nation in general.

Unwilling to reconsider its ill-practiced military conscription, the government of Eritrea sadly resorted to the least effective method of securing compliance – intimidation against and violent coercion upon Eritrea's youth. It opted to employ routine propaganda campaigns against young draft evaders with an effort of labeling them as "tourists but not refugees"⁵ or "traitors who failed to fulfill their national obligations"⁶. Moreover, it introduced or otherwise endorsed "arbitrary torture" and "prolonged imprisonments without trial", a "shoot-to-death"⁷ on site policy against those who are found to flee the country; and it even goes to the extent of arresting parents of the missing children – an utterly irresponsible and flawed measure which seriously continue to undermine Eritrea's long-stayed rich culture of treating the elders with respect and dignity.

Now, how could it be morally acceptable to denigrate, intimidate or otherwise to violently punish Eritrean youth for refusing to be part of this unjust military service program? In fact, the infamous malpractices and lawlessness within the military service is seriously undermining their inherent desire of building their own future, and serving their own family and the nation at large with respect and dignity.

⁴ See Broken Rifle No.68, Newsletter of War Resisters' International, An interview with previous members of Eritrean military service program who are now living in exile, Biserat Habte, *I have had enough of the war*, see also Said Ibrahim, *My torture in the Sun*, Page 3, November 2005. See also, Daniel R. Mekonnen, *Piercing the veil of impunity: An account of an eye witness*, available at <<http://zete9.asmarino.com/index.php?itemid=855#more>> (date accessed on 10 June 2007). Also see Elsa Chyrum, *Eritrea: Voices of Torture*, A documentary film publicly released on October 2006, available at <<http://cs.asmarino.com/?itemid=100>> (date accessed on 10 June 2007).

⁵ President Isaiyas Afewerki: 2005 interview with local media.

⁶ The phrase "traitors who failed to fulfill their national obligations" was a response given by Ambassador Tesfamichael Gerahtu when asked to comment on a protest march conducted on 28 September 2006 in front of the office of the Eritrean Embassy in South Africa in which around 100 young Eritreans were demanding, among others, an end for any sort of violent coercion in Eritrea. A brief report on the demonstration is available at <<http://www.emdhr.org/en/emdhr/successful-demonstration-in-south-africa-injustice-to-one-is-injustice-to.html>> (date accessed on 10 June 2007).

⁷ Refer to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US state department, Freedom House annual reports on Eritrea.

Increasing militarization: a threat to national and regional peace and security

Eritrea's rules continue to profess that the nation's promising political and economic processes has been "sabotaged by external forces". They therefore attempt to justify increasing militarization of Eritrea by claiming "it is all in the interest of safeguarding the nation's peace, security and territorial integrity". Yet today, peace and security remain very far from Eritrean reality. Instead, with each passing day, the nation continues degrading in all accounts.

In reality, the all-embracing consequence of increasing militarization of Eritrea has been "the suppression of the most dynamic section of the society". It continues to be a major cause for massive human rights abuses and the chronic poverty and backwardness prevailing in our society. It is only serving the interests of the few high-ranking political and military elites to stay longer in power by providing them enough leverage to effectively suppress any kind of dissent.

In fact, by promoting militant and violent mentality within the society, the increasing militarization of Eritrea remains to be a threat not only to peace and development of the nation, but also to regional peace and security as it is manifested by the destructive role the Eritrea's regime is playing from time to time.⁸

The way forward

We, in the EMDHR, in collaboration with other local and international human rights and peace organizations are trying to build various "communications platforms"⁹ among the Eritrean public and the international community with the aim of raising consciousness. Our efforts are largely directed at empowering Eritrean youth to continue their "disobedience and defiance" against the ill-practiced military service in an effort to undermine the increasing militarization of our society. We want them to boldly say "Eat my call up."

What can EU do to help?

On the above regard, we humbly request the European Union:

- to discourage any efforts that are sustaining the increasing militarization of our society;
- to provide moral and material support to indigenous efforts that are courageously endeavoring to undermine the increasing militarization of Eritrea; thereby contributing to the transformation of our society to a constitutional order.
- to withdraw diplomatic and material support to regime in Eritrea, for it is the one which is perpetuating the increasing militarization of our nation.

⁸ What is the Djibouti-Eritrea ongoing conflict is all about? The UN security council, Arab League, AU, IGAD have all condemned Eritrea for its "military aggression" and urged to withdraw its troops from the disputed territory.

⁹ EMDHR is an independent youth-based civic movement, based in South Africa, with members around the world. It strives for the promotion of the values of human rights and democratic principles among the Eritrean public. In collaboration with Eritrean civil society groups, EMDHR provides various communications platforms including a radio broadcasting service (VoMD), distribution of monthly newsletter, seminars and workshops and virtual conferences, letter writing campaigns and etc. for more information on EMDHR, visit its website at www.emdhr.org